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ABSTRACT

Gertrude Buck's doctoral dissertation, published in 1899, represented a radical departure from traditional treatments of metaphor. By approaching metaphor from an entirely new vantage point--psychology--Buck offered fresh insight and provided new explanations for the origin and function of figurative language. Buck made at least four other contributions to rhetorical theory: (1) she provided a psychological basis for the understanding of metaphor; (2) she offered an organic rather than a mechanistic conceptualization of language; (3) she refuted long-held notions that metaphor is mere ornamentation added to language for effect; and (4) she capitalized on new theories of communication that acknowledged both source and receiver in the creation of meaning. Through comparisons with the contemporary theories of I. A. Richards, Buck's theories can be seen as essentially 20th-century concepts in an embryonic stage of development. An acknowledgement of Buck's contributions should help place current theories of metaphor in the larger context as a conceptual history of metaphor is developed. (Fourteen references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Gertrude Buck on Metaphor: Twentieth-Century Concepts in a Late Nineteenth-Century Dissertation

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Abstract

Gertrude Buck's doctoral dissertation, published in 1899, represented a radical departure from traditional treatments of metaphor. By approaching metaphor from an entirely new vantage point--psychology--Buck offered fresh insight and provided new explanations for the origin and function of figurative language. In this paper, I explicate Buck's conceptualization of metaphor as developed and expressed in her dissertation. Through comparisons with the contemporary theories of I. A. Richards, it is shown that Buck's theories were essentially twentieth-century concepts in an embryonic stage of development. An acknowledgement of Buck's contributions should help place current theories of metaphor in the larger context as a conceptual history of metaphor is developed.

Gertrude Buck on Metaphor: Twentieth-Century Concepts in a Late Nineteenth-Century Dissertation

"At least since the time of Aristotle, metaphor has aroused the curiosity of thinkers" (Ortony, 1975, p. 45). And it is through the curiosity of thinkers that metaphor evolves conceptually. From Aristotle's view that metaphor is a stylistic device, an ornament, a departure from "the regular and proper terms for things" (Roberts, 1954, p. 168); through Hobbes, Locke, and the positivist philosophers who saw metaphor as "frivolous and inessential, if not dangerous and logically perverse" (Cohen, 1978, p. 5); we have arrived at a conceptualization of metaphor as "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3).

According to our contemporary conceptualization of metaphor, human thought processes as well as language are considered naturally metaphorical: we understand and experience things in terms of other things. I. A. Richards (1936) introduced this notion in his Philosophy of Rhetoric, a work Gabin (1988) called "a prophetic book, anticipating today's concern with the role of language in shaping the metaphors--the forms of thought--we live by" (p. 70). In essence, Richards is credited with sowing the seeds of thought about metaphor that prevail today.

While metaphor has undergone considerable conceptual development through time, not all the rungs in the evolutionary ladder have been

identified. In 1897, Gertrude Buck, a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, completed a dissertation entitled "The Metaphor: A Study in the Psychology of Rhetoric." Her dissertation was subsequently published in Fred Newton Scott's (1899) Contributions to Rhetorical Theory but her insights have been largely ignored. As Mulderig (1984) stated:

> Our neglect of Buck is unfortunate, because she is an important, though unacknowledged, precursor of today's New Rhetoricians. Her attitudes toward language, her conception of the composing process, and her interest in psychology's implications for rhetoric are all distinctly modern. The current popularity of ideas that Buck originally developed nearly a century ago confirms Richard Young's warning that "without a knowledge of history, we have no way of knowing what is genuinely new, what is redundant, what is promising" in contemporary rhetoric (p. 95).

This essay is an attempt to resurrect Buck's (1899) conceptualization of metaphor and to acknowledge her contributions to rhetorical theory, contributions that may help place current theories in a larger perspective. The essay will begin with an explication of her thinking about metaphor as developed and expressed in her dissertation. Several comparisons will then be made between Buck's theorizing and that of Richards, drawing primarily from Lectures V and VI of his Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936). In comparing the two rhetoricians, it becomes apparent that Buck's dissertation, written

in the late nineteenth century, contained several twentieth-century concepts about metaphor at an earlier stage of development.

Gertrude Buck on Metaphor

Buck's (1899) dissertation represents a radical departure from traditional treatments of metaphor and a courageous challenge to the thinking of her contemporaries. Her greatest departure from tradition was her utilization of knowledge from other disciplines to explain the origin and function of figurative language. In doing so, Buck made at least five contributions to rhetorical theory. First, she provided a psychological basis for the understanding of metaphor. Second, she offered an organic rather than mechanistic conceptualization of language. Third, she refuted long-held notions that metaphor is mere ornamentation added to language for effect. Fourth, she capitalized on new theories of communication that acknowledged both source and receiver in the creation of meaning. Finally, by drawing upon concepts from other disciplines, Buck was able to approach metaphor from an entirely new vantage point, offering fresh insight and greater explanatory power to the study of figurative language. These contributions, especially surprising considering her position in time, are discussed below.

Buck (1899) was heavily influenced by nineteenth-century developments in science and psychology. In her dissertation she referred

knowledgeably to the theories of Dewey, James, Sully, and Romanes and used what she self-consciously referred to as "scientific terms," such as "homogeneity" and "heterogeneity." She compared the development of a metaphor to the process of fission at the lowest forms of life. And she referred to psychological theories of stimulus and response in her discussion of the mental effort involved in deciphering a metaphor.

Indeed, Buck's (1899) dissertation was an attempt "to explain metaphor in terms of the contemporary psychology" (p. iiii). She attempted to determine the motives of a metaphor maker and to discover the mental processes of both metaphor maker and metaphor receiver. While she acknowledged that only indirect evidence of subjective experience can explain mental processes, this limitation did not prevent her from speculating. Consider, for example, her description of how the mind works when one encounters a metaphor:

> The focus of attention is first driven about helplessly from one image to the other. It cannot rest upon either and the mind is consequently forced somehow to unify the two, to trace back the opposing images to their common source, to reproduce the writer's original perception, in all its teeming vagueness. The shock of the two incongruous images in such close juxtaposition acts as a powerful stimulus upon the mind (p. 51).

In providing a psychological basis for metaphor, Buck's (1899) main contention was that metaphors are linguistic manifestations or representations of stages in thought development. She accepted the prevailing distinction made between radical and poetic metaphors, but offered new, psychologically-based explanations for their origin. Buck rejected the traditional explanation that radical metaphors arise from poverty of language, asserting, instead, that radical metaphors arise from poverty of thought. From a psychological perspective, radical metaphor can be seen as the "naive, unconscious act of an awakening intelligence . . . the expression in language of the earliest stage of perception, the stage which consists of the first vague sensuous impression of a situation" (p. 68). In the earliest stage of thought development, according to Buck, an individual is unable to perceive differences, so uses the same term for two different entities. She offered as examples the child who calls a bird's nest a "house" or applies the term "pussy-cat" to soft fur or velvet. The child's first impressions in language are large, chaotic, undifferentiated impressions; the child is unable to differentiate between nest and house, cat fur and soft material.

Buck (1899) also saw radical metaphor as the creation of the hearer, not the speaker:

> This use of the same name to indicate different situations, though called radical metaphor, is to the speaker no metaphor at all, since for him there are not two situations, but only one. The metaphor appears only when the hearer recognizes the fact that these situations are in reality two (p. 68).

Whereas the radical metaphor is artless, naive, and unintentional--created out of necessity--the poetic metaphor is "the radical metaphor grown into a consciousness of itself" (Buck, 1899, p. 19). It is, according to Buck, an expression of the writer's perceptions at the next stage of development. The writer is able to differentiate between distinct elements, but shares with his or her audience the revealing moment when distinct entities appeared as one. Poetic metaphor is:

> a straightforward attempt to communicate to another person the maker's vision of an object as it appeared to him at the moment of expression . . . the writer is simply taking a snap-shot at his own process of perception in one of its intermediate stages (p. 35).

With this explanation, Buck rejected the prevailing notion of her time that poetic metaphor is constructed primarily for its effect on an audience, a development that will be discussed in greater detail below.

Buck's (1899) conceptualization of language was organic rather than mechanistic. The influence Darwin had on her thinking and the biological perspective she brought to the study of figurative language are evident in her

word choice. "Genesis: The Radical Metaphor," "Genesis: The Poetic Metaphor," "The Evolution into Plain Statement," and "Pathological Forms of Metaphor" are titles of dissertation chapters. She dismissed earlier thinkers as having "dissected the dead body of the metaphor" and stated her own desire to know "not merely the anatomy of the metaphor, but its life" (p. 2). Her explanation of radical metaphor is rich with her own biological metaphors:

> If a definition be required, radical metaphor arises when a thought has outgrown its form of expression. It is the bursting forth of a doubly branching significance from the single sheath of language once adequate to contain it (p. 18).

Indeed, Buck's entire theory of metaphor is developmental and evolutionary. Beginning with radical metaphor, seen as spontaneous expression during the most primitive stages of human perception; moving to poetic metaphor conceived in an intermediate stage of development; on to simile, wherein entities are seen as distinct but connected by resemblance; thought and language evolve into plain (or literal) statement. Through this developmental process we see gradual differentiation from a homogeneous mass of sensation through increasingly heterogeneity to plain statement, which has necessarily passed through the earlier metaphoric stages of the human mind. Metaphor, then, is a living, growing, organic process, not a mechanical structuring of language.

Buck's (1899) psychological explanation and organic conceptualization of metaphor render older theories of metaphor as artificial ornamentation impossible. When metaphor is perceived to be representative of stages in thought development, metaphor is also understood to be a natural component of language rather than a mechanical literary device. As Buck explained, "the fact that metaphor is attributed to a normal and universal process of mind, which seeks only its expression in language, destroys at once the theory of an artificial origin" (p. 34). Metaphor is not a manufactured product, but "springs spontaneously out of a genuine thought process" (p. 35). With Buck, the mechanistic view of metaphor dies.

Buck (1899) further demonstrated her ability to incorporate modern ideas into her writing by capitalizing on a theory of communication that sees source and receiver as co-creators of meaning. She relegated to the "old school" rhetoricians who are solely concerned with persuasion and the effect one has on the reader or listener. Instead, she subscribed to a "communication theory of discourse, which has . . . largely superseded the one-sided theories of discourse as persuasion and as self-expression" (p. 30). As she explained:

> When discourse is regarded as communication the two factors in the process are equally emphasized. In order that the writer's vision be communicated to the reader's eye, the one factor is as necessary as

> the other. Not the reader alone is concerned, nor yet the writer, but both equally have a part in the literary process (p. 30).

If a metaphor is made only to please the metaphor maker, or only to please the reader, Buck would say the metaphor maker is practicing bad art. Artificial, contrived metaphors are mere conceits, "beneath the dignity of the real artist" (p. 29). The true poetic metaphor, in contrast, invites the reader to reconstruct the mental processes of the metaphor maker as the metaphor came into being.

Buck and Richards Compared

The work of Richards can be considered representative of a twentieth-century conceptualization of metaphor. Richards is credited with introducing the tenor-vehicle distinction and the interactive view of metaphor dominant today (Enholm, 1988). He elevated the lowly status of metaphor to one of supreme importance in understanding human thought, with metaphor the model of all language and meaning (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). Metaphor, according to Richards (1936), is the "constitutive form" of language, the "omnipresent principle of all its free action" (p. 90).

Several comparisons can be made between the two rhetoricians. Like Buck, Richards was interested in psychological ideas, originally studying medicine with the intention of becoming a psychoanalyst (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). He, too, used psychology to develop his theories and drew additional knowledge from a variety of other disciplines, including

linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy. Both Buck and Richards represent a radical departure from the traditional notion that metaphor is an exceptional use of language. And both saw metaphor source and metaphor receiver united in the creation of meaning.

In using a psychogical basis for explaining the origin and function of metaphor, Richards (1936) speculated on the inner processes of the mind, much as Buck did years earlier:

> Let us consider more closely what happens in the mind when we put together--in a sudden and striking fashion--two things belonging to very different orders of experience. The most important happenings--in addition to a general confused reverberation and strain--are the mind's efforts to connect them. The mind is a connecting organ, it works only by connecting and it can connect any two things in an indefinitely large number of ways (Richards, pp. 124-125).

Buck's (1899) psychological explanation saw metaphors as linguistic manifestations of stages in perceptual development. Language evolves naturally from radical to poetic metaphor through simile to literal statement as human perception develops. Richards (1936) took the psychological explanation of metaphor a step further: "thought is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language are derived therefrom" (p. 94). One can study how humans think by examining their

language; one can study how humans use language by examining thought (Golden, Berquist, & Coleman, 1978). The key to understanding both language and thought is metaphor. For Buck, metaphor reflected the perceptions; for Richards, metaphor organized perceptions. For Buck, metaphor represented stages in thought development; for Richards, thought itself is metaphoric.

Richards (1936) also moved beyond Buck's theorizing with his introduction of the interactive view of metaphor. As he explained, "when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction" (p. 93). Consequently, a metaphor cannot be reduced to its constituent parts or to its literal equivalent. A metaphor is a new creation constituting new insight that was not present before the metaphor was made (Enholm, 1988). Yet Buck's (1899) words suggest an awakening of ideas similar to Richards': "It is only through the metaphor-process that abstract ideas come into existence" (p. 42). She seemed to be aware of the creative possibilities of language:

> We need not, then, from the statement that metaphor depends upon a new situation, conclude that all situations will in time become so far analyzed and defined that vital, natural figures will be impossible. Such a view indicates limited imagination and narrow faith. It is psychologically true that the analysis of any situation deepens and

> changes not only that situation but its observer. His eyes are opened to see new objects, or old ones in a new light. He is a different man and his world is new. There is thus no limit to the new situations of which our expanding universe and our expanding selves are capable (p. 45).

Finally, both rhetoricians acknowledged the interaction of speaker and listener, writer and reader, in understanding metaphor. Buck attributed the creation of a radical metaphor to the hearer; she saw the poetic metaphor as an invitation to the metaphor receiver to reconstruct the mental processes of the metaphor maker. Richards saw meaning as arising not only from the interaction of the tenor and vehicle, but also from the interaction of the reader as he or she becomes involved in interpreting a metaphor (Russo, 1990). Both Buck and Richards saw metaphor source and receiver united in the creation of meaning.

Conclusion

In each of the parallels drawn between Buck and Richards, one can see Richards' theories as more sophisticated, more fully developed, moving beyond Buck's thinking to enrich understanding of metaphor in the twentieth century. Yet in Buck's dissertation one can see resemblances to contemporary thought, thinking that was distinctly modern and predictive of the thinking to come with the turn of the century.

Buck's contributions to rhetorical theory appear especially progressive considering the date of her dissertation. The contributions of nineteenth-century American rhetoricians have been generally regarded as simplistic and derivative, concerned primarily with mechanical correctness, with little effort to probe the underlying principles of language (Halloran, 1990). Buck, said Halloran, was an exception. Kitzhaber (1990) also credits Buck with offering the only serious attempt during this period to examine the nature and function of figurative language:

> Buck deserves much credit for her courage in brushing away the accumulated dust of well over two thousand years and for making an earnest attempt to attack the subject of metaphor from a wholly new point of view (p. 186).

The Philosophy of Rhetoric (Richards, 1936) was published just 37 years after Buck's dissertation and only 14 years after her death. It appears, however, that Richards was unaware of her contributions on metaphor. He stated, for example:

> The neglect of the study of the modes of metaphor in the later nineteenth century was due, I think, to a general feeling that those [traditional] methods of inquiry were unprofitable, and the time was not ripe for a new attack (p. 115).

Yet Buck did study; she did "attack." We can only infer that Richards was not cognizant of her work. Nor were many others.

No direct link between Buck and Richards--or Buck and the twentieth century--can be suggested, of course, when her contributions to rhetorical theory have only recently begun to be recognized. But her writing does illustrate evolution in thought. Buck challenged traditional theories as well as the thinking of her contemporaries. She was one of the first to deliberately use psychological principles to explain the origin and function of metaphor. She offered an organic rather than mechanistic conceptualization of language. And she emphasized the interaction of speaker and hearer in the co-creation of meaning. Within her dissertation can be found important precursors to contemporary conceptualizations of figurative language, twentieth-century concepts in an embryonic stage of development. Her contributions place current theories in a larger perspective as they flesh out missing pieces in the continuing story of metaphor.

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